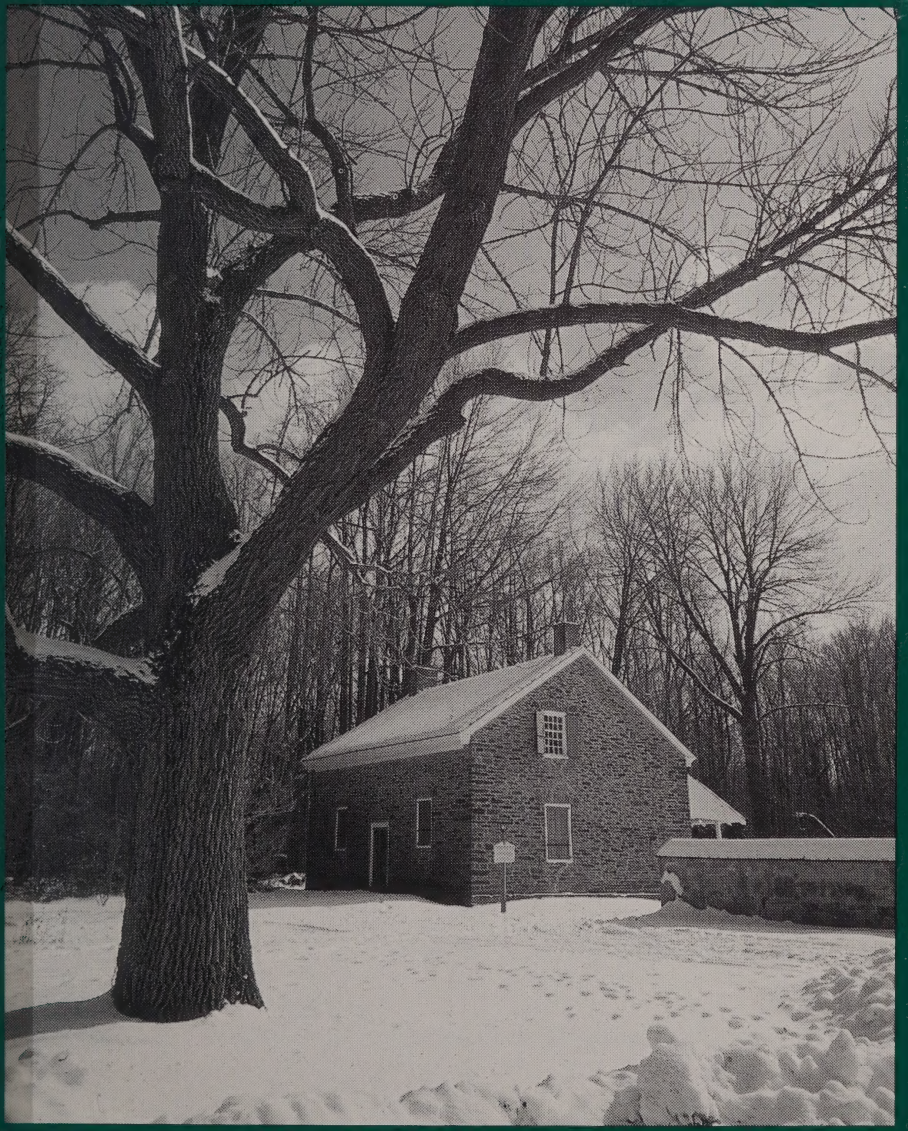
v.49, no. 6 (Dec 1998)

SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ DECEMBER 1998

SACRED JOURNEY™

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit

of unity among humankind.

CONTENTS

Vol. 49, No. 6, December 1998

FROM THE PRESIDENT 2

FROM THE EDITOR 4

Laurie Goes Looking for God 6
A Parable of Spiritual Experience
Kim Boykin

WAYS OF PRAYER 12
Letting Our Bodies Pray
Flora Slosson Wuellner

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE 20
Enraptured by Silence
Alvin Joaquin Figueroa

SPRITUALITY AND THE FAMILY 27
Christmas Eve Meditation
Dianne Price

PRAYERS 30

SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY 32
For God All Things are Possible
Diane Weber

SPIRITUALITY AND HEALING 37
Gratitude: The Heart of Grace
Elizabeth Ann Bartlett

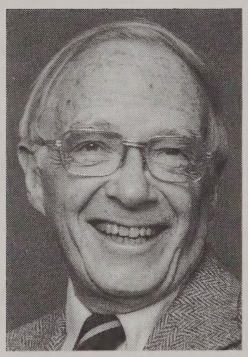
ILLUMINATIONS 41

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED 43

POETRY 45

Cover photo by Cliff Moore. Princeton Quaker Meeting House.

FROM THE PRESIDENT



I was fumbling my way through the dark jumble of my basement the other day–looking for I don't remember what–when I came upon a collection of wooden figures from a nativity scene we had been given many years ago, when our daughter was an infant. Eventually, it ended up with all the other long-forgotten stuff that clutters our basement from many a Christmas past.

As I picked up and gazed into the face of the infant Jesus in his cradle, I reflected on our recent pilgrimages to Iona, Lindisfarne, and Glendalough–ancient holy places of Celtic Christianity–and the basic Celtic belief that when you look into the face of a newborn child, you are looking at the image of Christ. The Celts believed that we are born in a state of original goodness–not original sin–and that we retain that basic purity and goodness, however deeply we may lose ourselves in the dark woods of selfishness and envy, hatred and fear, indifference and apathy, contempt and pride.

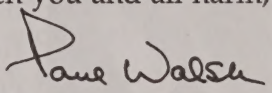
To show us the way back to the original, blessed ground of our being, the light of Christ blazed into the world in the dead of winter, on the darkest night of the year, when all living beings were at their lowest ebb.

Jesus spent the rest of his life in a profound and continuous relationship with the Spirit of God, showing and teach-

ing us that the divine power and presence is all around us and in us, and we in it, and that its true nature, and ours, is unconditional love and compassion.

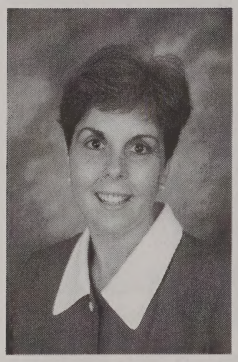
Almost two thousand years later, in our bondage to the values and goodies of this world, we still forget that our journey is toward and with God. Christmas Day, as we open our presents, is a good day to remember that we are on a sacred journey, and that we can find our way back to our true and basic goodness with the help of the greatest gift of all: "The light that enlightens every person coming into the world."

God between you and all harm,



Paul Walsh

FROM THE EDITOR



"Christ took on flesh for love, because flesh is loveable," says a character in Mary Gordon's novel, *The Company of Women.* Attracted by the lights of an all night diner, a wandering old man enters an open door, finds a simple welcome and a warm cup of coffee. In this commonplace event, he rediscovers "the enduring promise of plain human love." And then he says, "I understood the meaning of the incarnation, for I believe, the first time."

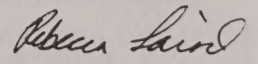
Embodied love is what Christians celebrate this season. Divine love wrapped in human form is at the core of the Christmas story. The love that pulsed through Jesus' tiny body, marked in the sky by a bright light, soon compelled the wandering ones–simple shepherds and sophisticated star-gazers alike–to come near, to offer gifts, to kneel, and to go away changed by innocent yet powerful love.

This marvel of God-with-us is imbedded in many of the articles we offer to you this month. Kim Boykin describes through fiction how "Laurie Goes Looking for God" and discovers that it makes "no sense to look for God in the midst of God." In our *Ways of Prayer*

feature, Flora Slosson Wuellner announces: "Our bodies love to pray and rejoice and bring us closer to God." Alvin Joaquin Figueroa, author of *A Transforming Experience* feature, tells of his long search for a house of stillness where he, as a gay man, could find peace. In "Christmas Eve Meditation," Dianne Price recollects how waiting for the coming of the Christ child unites generations past and future. God-directed prayer and spiritual friendship join to build Diane Weber's backyard hermitage in *Spiritual Community.* In *Spirituality and Healing*, Elizabeth Ann Bartlett's heart transplant forces her to cultivate a spirit of gratitude in the face of a life-threatening illness. We are delighted to publish for the first time, twelve-year-old poet Gabrielle Perez who extols us to, "Keep a firm grip on your beliefs and trust your heart," while poet David Dod lyrically writes of cinnamon buns and a visit to a bed-ridden man in "Incarnation." In *Books We've Enjoyed,* I review my two favorite books from this past year in hopes that you may wish to read them, too. As you peruse this issue you'll notice the addition of line drawings. We welcome to the journal the talents of artists Charles and Lucy McVicker.

Enjoy the good gifts of these writers and artists who offer evidence that the divine dwells in human form and expresses transformative love though us.

Blessings,



Rebecca Laird

LAURIE GOES LOOKING FOR GOD

A Parable of Spiritual Experience

Kim Boykin

Once upon a time, there was a young woman named Laurie who noticed that she was a very small being in a very large universe.

She noticed that no one had bothered to consult with her about some of the most important things in life: being born, suffering, dying. No one had asked her if she wanted to be born into a universe like this. And now that she was here, sooner or later she was going to die, and no one asked her if that was okay either. She was angry about this, and confused, and frightened.

Laurie desperately longed to find some peace and joy, though she hardly dared hope that that was possible in such a universe. She desperately longed to know God, though she hardly dared hope that a good and powerful and loving God actually created and ruled such a mess of a universe.

Laurie had heard stories about other people's journeys, and even though she didn't entirely trust those

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Charles McVicker

stories, she didn't know what else to do, so she got in a boat to paddle to God.

She'd had little experience with boats, though she'd read a lot about them, and she wasn't in very good shape, but there was nothing more important to her than finding God, so she paddled and paddled, and paddled. It was exhausting, and her arms ached, but she kept moving.

And God, who created and enfolded and permeated every speck of creation, watched Laurie's journey and smiled a tender smile.

After a while, Laurie started to wonder if she was going in the right direction. She didn't feel like she was any closer to God, but then, she didn't really know how she would be able to tell.

She decided that maybe her little boat was the wrong way to get to God. Probably, she needed something faster and more powerful. So she paddled in to the shore and got a motorcycle. This was scarier than her boat, but she put on her helmet and set off again to find God.

Laurie tried all sorts of ways to get to God. She tried a bus. She tried an airplane. She tried backpacking. She wished she had a transporter and could beam herself directly to God. She tried sailing, even though she knew that sailboats made her seasick. She tried bicycling.

None of it seemed to be working. She was getting worn out and frustrated.

And God looked on with patience and loving concern, as Laurie continued to look for God in the midst of God.

Laurie had heard that actually God is everywhere,

that God is always right here, whether she could see that or not. And she started to wonder if that might be true. She hoped that it was. Maybe she didn't need to *go* anywhere to find God.

So she tried looking for God through a microscope. She tried an electron microscope. She tried infrared goggles. She tried magnetic resonance imaging.

She got some dynamite and tried to blast through whatever was between her and God.

It seemed like she must be going about this in the wrong way.

Sometimes she despaired of ever finding God. Sometimes she despaired that there was a God to be found. She cried and she cried.

She could see that you couldn't find a God who had never been lost.

And God was sad.

Laurie had heard that actually there was nothing she could do to find God, that no human effort could bring one to God. It did seem like all her own efforts had failed, so she hoped that this might be true.

So she waited for God to come to her. She paced around the living room. She trimmed her toenails. She watched daytime talk shows. She sat and stared out the window. She waited and she waited. She wondered why God wasn't here yet.

She had heard that some people cry out to God, plead with God, even yell at God.

Maybe, Laurie thought, she needed to *ask* God to come to her. She tried calling God on the phone. She got God's machine and left pleading and angry and tearful messages, but God never called back. She tried

writing letters to God. She tried e-mailing God. Sometimes she felt a little better when she wrote to God, but it didn't seem like God was ever going to write back.

Laurie had heard that the whole journey is just trying one strategy after another until you finally see that all strategies are useless.

So she decided that maybe, in order to find God, she just needed to quit trying to find God. So she sold her bicycle. She gave her microscope to the kid next door. She unplugged her phone.

But she knew that there was something fishy about all this. She could see that even trying to quit trying to find God was still a strategy.

So she tried to quit trying to quit. But that was still the same thing!

Laurie was confused. She didn't know *what* to do. It seemed like there was nothing she *could* do. She just sat there being confused.

And she thought she caught a glimpse of the shadow of God's big toe.

Laurie wished that this were almost the end of her search. She wished that she finally knew, deep down in her bones, that God is always right here. She wanted to live happily ever after.

But instead: She thought that maybe she had hit on something when she just sat there being confused. Maybe that was the way of quitting trying to find God, and now she could finally really find God.

But that was still the same confusion!

She wondered why God wouldn't just have mercy on her and her crazy predicament and speak out of the clouds to her. She was mad at God for letting her go through all this. She was sick of it.

Laurie could see that it made no sense to look for God in the midst of God. She could see that you couldn't *find* a God who had never been *lost*.

And yet, she still longed to find God more than anything else in the world.

Letting Our Bodies Pray

Flora Slosson Wuellner

Coming into my room, tired after a full day of teaching and counseling, I saw through the window a small bird splashing in the rain-filled gutter of the porch roof. Its little body ecstatically cleansed itself as it flapped its wings and ruffled its dusty feathers. The moment was one of those time sabbaths which are scattered through our days. Almost without thinking about it, I moved to the basin and began to wash *my* face and hands. Suddenly and eagerly my body claimed this act of washing as a cleansing and release from the tasks and problems of the day.

"Is my body really teaching me to pray?" I wondered. It was an exciting thought. I had learned (with difficulty) to pray for my body, but letting my body take the lead and show me new ways of praying was a sudden, new possibility.

If our bodies signal stress to us, communicate inner problems, and become increasingly our true partners

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Flora Slosson Wuellner is a former adjunct faculty member of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA. She is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a frequent leader of retreats. Her most recent book is Feed My Shepherds: Spiritual Healing and Renewal for those in Christian Leadership.

in our emotional and spiritual living, why shouldn't they also signal to us spontaneous ways of praying? Are there deep and beautiful ways of encountering God's nearness which we have not experienced, simply because we have not allowed our bodies to be full spiritual partners?

I began to observe my body in some of its most natural and spontaneous acts. Slowly I began to realize that when our bodies are not interfered with by artificial constraints and stimulants, their every act is meant to be a sacramental way of receiving nurture from God. The simple yet satisfying yawning and stretching when we wake can be an act of prayer if we so choose. The word *inspiration* actually refers to the act of breathing. Just as God breathed the breath of life into the first living being, so our deep, instinctive taking of breath is receiving again the gift of life from God for each moment. Stretching fully flexes the muscles, stimulates the circulation, and is another way by which the body breathes and thus prays. Tasting and eating can become the body's way of receiving God's nurture through the gifts of the earth. All the five senses can become ways of profound receiving and giving. I have sometimes thought that certain forms of physical addiction might result from sensory starvation rather than from over-sensuousness.

We were intended to receive God's full energizing nurture through all five senses. If we try to receive life's energy only through one or two senses, we may become over-dependent on those channels. If we overeat, over-drink, depend on constant sexual encounters, need to talk constantly or be always surrounded by loud music, we need not only to be released from our addictions but also to *expand* our sensory awareness through other ways.

Charles McVicker

If we overeat, for example, depending on the comfort of food as the only energy giver and the only source of comforting nurture, it would be helpful to listen quietly to our bodies for a few minutes rather than to head automatically for the kitchen. Our bodies can then signal to us how we are really feeling and suggest other ways by which we can receive comfort and energy.

Perhaps we would find it helpful to dance and stretch in our rooms instead, letting our bodies express what we feel and want and need. We can get in touch with many buried feelings this way. Klarise Davis, of the Loretto Community in Albany, California, once told me, "Anger causes toxins to form in the large muscles of the body. In order to release these toxins, use them in exercise, releasing also the stored anger."

Grieving, hurt, and loneliness can often be reached and expressed in this same way. Sometimes we will want to use our whole body to express the feeling; sometimes it will be enough just to let the hands, feet, or head move. At other times, just listening to music and letting it fill us will meet and feed our hunger.

We can also receive nourishment from our inner hungers and needs by visualizing light rising from the very center of the earth and then, either standing or sitting, drawing it up with our hands as if pulling a warm garment of light over our whole body. Or we can stretch up and out with our hands and arms as if receiving energizing light coming from above and around us. This stretching should not be jerky or abrupt, but should be gentle, thoughtful, flowing. I was very helped by a suggestion from Mary Anne Finch, codirector of the Center of Growth and Wholeness in Oakland, California, about the prayerful stretch: "Be still and *see* the posture in your mind. Then slowly move into it. Hold the posture, then slowly move out of it. Pause, and allow your body to acknowledge the benefits of the stretch."

What I am suggesting here is not the same boring maxim, "Cut out the overeating and exercise instead." That misses the point and puts us right back into the same desperate war between our willpower and our unencountered hungers. Rather, I am suggesting a new understanding of *both* eating and exercise (as well as of all our other physical actions) as ways of receiving God's loving grace. If we find we have depended too much on one way only, God invites us to expand our ways of receiving in many other ways.

If body movement is not possible or appropriate at

the moment, our whole selves can also be reenergized by looking at some loved color in a rock, a flower, a fabric, a picture. Color is astonishingly energizing. If we take a few moments, we will often feel drawn to some special color which will "feed" us at that moment. I remember during some weeks when I was depleted after the flu, I felt the need to look often at a certain shade of red; to touch it, wear it. It seemed to warm and strengthen me. At another time, I kept dreaming of a luminous shade of blue and finally realized that my deep self was trying to signal me that this special color was important for me at that time. Historians tell us that the walls of great cathedrals of the middle ages were not whitewashed as so many of them are now, but were painted with frescoes of rich colors. And, of course, the stained glass windows were not only showing the Bible stories to those who could not read, but were also feeding with radiant color the bodies and souls of those who lived bleak, exhausting lives outside those church walls. Whether or not the builders and craftsmen realized this, human needs were being fed on many levels.

The receiving of energy through sensory channels need not be through sight alone. We can let water run over our hands, giving its special gift. We can hold a flower to smell or a stone or crystal to touch. We can gently massage the hands, arms, neck, face, feet. Our loving touch on our own bodies is healing and comforting. When we eat, we can do it slowly, deliberately, gratefully, noticing the taste, texture, and fragrance of the food, knowing that every bite is a loving gift of God's nearness.

We can go outdoors and put our hands on a living shrub, receiving the vibratory energy from that living

being. We can open our palms and lift our faces to the sunlight and air, taking nurture from that primal source. We can lie down on the ground, letting the strong earth hold our full weight like a father, mother, or trusted friend.

Try taking a "parable walk," in which you set out with no special agenda, asking God to show you something that will be meaningful, relevant to your problems and feelings. Whenever I take a parable walk or suggest it to members of a retreat, there is always something observed or experienced that is helpful. It is not usually something sensational. Other people may have noticed nothing, but it seems significant for your life. It might be something about a cloud, a tree, a door. It may be the way a tree is shaped, what an ant is doing, or how a bird is sounding. It might be someone's face, the way the breeze feels, or the way a dog is barking. But there will be something God wanted you to encounter. Perhaps it will evoke memory whose time for healing has come. It may offer guidance for an unsolved problem. It may give you the inner nurture you need. You may be comforted or become aware of a new insight. You may be enabled to laugh, to weep, to love, or to release.

God invites us to expand our ways of receiving.

When receiving God's gifts and nurture through the senses, it is essential to be deliberate, aware, focusing upon each event, receptive to each sensory experience in its uniqueness. This is the very opposite of greed and lust, which are usually based upon unhealed wounds, anxiousness, fear of deprivation, and the resulting habits of grasping rather then receiving.

O taste and see

(touch and smell

and hear)

that the Lord

is good.

Psalm 34:8 adapted

Sometimes when I suggest some forms of bodily prayer in a retreat or workshop, people are surprised. "You mean that touching a tree, taking a walk, lying on the grass, dancing, eating, stretching, playing with clay can be *prayer*?" one middle-aged man recently asked in bewilderment. "I never thought of those things as spiritual. Maybe prayer is easier than I thought."

Yes, prayer *is* easier than we thought. Prayer was always meant to be part of our everyday lives, part of our bodies, part of all our actions. It does not mean that we are to be solemn and unsmiling as we act sacramentally through our bodies. A sacrament, whether in the church or out of it, is meant to make us more fully human, not less. "The glory of God is the fully alive human being," Iranaeus said in the second century. Yes, we are to respond to the body's acts of worship with intentionality, awareness, deliberation, but also with pleasure.

One of the holiest experiences I ever had was also one of the most bodily. My husband and I were invited to join a Jewish couple for their sabbath meal. The food was simple, lovingly prepared, and flavorful. Between courses, we celebrated one of the five senses. At one point, our hosts passed around a flower for us to contemplate, touch, and smell. At another point, a piece of fruit was passed from hand to hand, with each person experiencing the fruit. Later, we sang a short song, delighting in the melody and in each other's voices. This sensory awareness of God's gifts was woven into the act of eating. I had seldom sat at a table where there was so much joy, laughter, and closeness to one another along with the sense of the nearness of God and the holiness of God's gifts. Our bodies love to pray and rejoice and bring us closer to God, if only we let them.

Enraptured by Silence

Alvin Joaquin Figueroa

For many years, while dreaming about a religious life through ordination, I used to have a recurrent dream. In this dream I am wearing a clerical shirt, but right at the moment when I am going to put on my Roman collar, a strange magnetic force prevents me from wearing it. It does not matter how I try, my hands cannot reach my neck, and I remain holding the collar with an excruciating empty sensation. In my long theological journey, every time I toyed with the idea of a religious life, the dream came back, and the only interpretation I could give to it was that The Divinity did not want my service.

When I was a child I even used to play Mass, instead of war or cowboys. I was raised in San Juan in a Roman Catholic household, and the Hispanic family always considers the idea of priesthood a blessing. So, after finishing high school, and after a friendly priest convinced me not to join Maryknoll on account of my young age, I decided that once I had finished my de-

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gree at The University of Puerto Rico, I would enter The Society of Jesus.

Jesuits administered the Catholic Center of the university, and there was a lot of encouragement on the campus for my future life as a priest. The Jesuits gave me a solid formation in terms of social and political education. These were the early seventies, and they were helping to change things, especially in Latin America. This is how I came to know Liberation Theology and the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

I was ready to join these soldiers of Christ . . . until Eros came into my path. My sexuality awakened at the same time as my desires for social justice and I fell in love with a Presbyterian man. I shared my life with him for almost seven years.

The Church was ready to liberate the oppressed, but did not respond to my own personal oppression as a gay man in a straight world. That's when I started having my dream: the white collar in my hands and the invisible force that stopped me from wearing it. I interpreted the dream in these terms: I am gay, I cannot be a priest. So, I decided to come to the United States to work on a doctoral degree in literature and stayed away from church matters until I came in contact with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC).

To make the long story short, the same year I got my doctoral degree, I became a member and became very much involved with UFMCC's ministry during the next ten years. This is a Christian denomination with a special outreach for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. At last I had found a place where I could worship and where my sexuality was

not an issue. I decided that I wanted to be ordained in this denomination in order to serve God, despite the theological contradictions I was finding in a space where, ironically, fundamentalism was clashing with my leftist Jesuit formation. My dream came back all over again. But this time the clerical shirt, for some reason, was distinctively gray. What was wrong with me? Why was God rejecting me?

Theological conflicts with UFMCC dogmas made me depart from my venture with Protestantism, and I found myself alone with no spiritual home. I was too radical to be in a Protestant denomination of this sort, and my disagreements with Catholic dogma left me no

Cliff Moore

room in that religious house. After thirty years of Catholicism, and ten more of Protestantism, I was not even sure of my Christianity; but my recurrent dream was still present.

I began looking anew for a path that could lead me back to God. But this time I was searching for a spiritual home where sexuality was neither the center of things, nor an issue; and where creeds and formulas could not rule my spiritual life. I ended up visiting a Quaker meeting house. I had read about The Religious Society of Friends and their history, and it was time for me to explore. I was very curious about the nature of an unprogrammed meeting where there are no planned structures and where the worship service is an hour of divine expectation. This non-credal and expectant religion was the answer, for I never knew the power of silence until that first meeting. I had never before experienced the fulfillment of stillness: how we can feel like monks within the world, and let ourselves be the instruments of God's Spirit. Suddenly I started to make up definitions: Quakerism is Catholicism without the trimmings; Pentecostalism without the noise; primitive Christianity; rational mysticism . . . However, since becoming a Friend I have discovered that Quakerism is an individual experience; that not everything in life has a clear answer; and that The Light resides within each one of us. In addition, my new spiritual home has helped me understand many things both Catholic and Protestant that I did not understand before. Some of us like to call Quakerism alternative Christianity, a Third Way. In truth, what attracted me to this spiritual home was the worship style: the house of silence. If the Spirit moves us, we speak; and there's

nothing more comforting than to be in what we call a gathered meeting, where the Spirit manifests itself through many utterances. In this space I found something that was very common to my ancestral history: it is precisely the concept of spiritual immanence rather than transcendence, that saints like Teresa de Avila and John of the Cross articulated very well through their mystic poetry. And it is this type of theological language that I was seeking and have found.

My friends make fun of me. They cannot seem to imagine me in silence or in meditation. To be honest, it is a cultural challenge for a Puerto Rican to be silent for a whole hour. But it is possible, and it works! For me, it is a time for meditation and prayer, and a way to recharge my batteries for the week. But more than anything, it is my source of peace. No space makes me feel the peace I have found in the simplicity of the Quaker meeting. It is a peace I keep on feeling during the rest of the week simply because The Divine resides in me.

My best friend is now a postulant for Roman priesthood. About four years ago, he and I sat down in San Juan. It was Christmas time and the blue of the sky was incredibly beautiful: not a single cloud and an overwhelming radiance. We kept on staring at the Atlantic Ocean for about an hour and did not say anything to each other. This part of the Island is known as the Puerto Rican Trench and it has the deepest water in the hemisphere. Both of us felt a great sense of communion and spiritual presence while letting ourselves become intoxicated by the sound of the sea and the Caribbean sun. That was when I learned to appreciate silence amid the beauty of my tropics and the gift of

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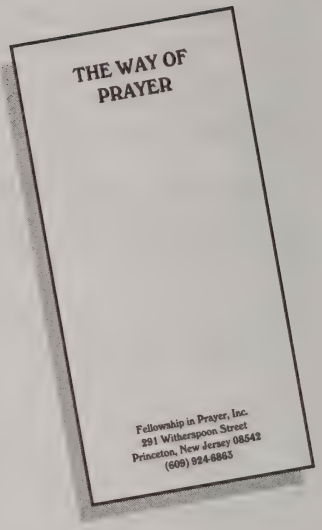

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Please use this space to tell us your thoughts about this publication, *Sacred Journey.*

friendship. The memory of this moment often helps me to center down in Quaker worship meetings.

By the way, I stopped having that dream! I don't need it any more, because the clerical shirt and the Roman collar were not the answers to my spiritual journey. From the very begining God was telling me that we are all the vessels of the Holy Spirit, and that there is that of God in everyone.

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SPIRITUALITY & THE FAMILY

Except for the still point, there would be
no dance. And there is only the dance.
T. S. Eliot

Christmas Eve Meditation

Dianne Price

There is a moment on Christmas Eve when a stillness hangs on the air, like the whole world is holding its breath. I've felt it many a Christmas, but especially when my children were young. The feeling is palpable, as if one could touch its fullness, or smell its sweetness.

It's late in the evening, shortly before midnight.The kids are in bed, all is quiet. I sit alone in front of the glittering tree, presents piled around it, and pause from life's hurriedness. The comings and goings of the busy day melt away.

And though no one is with me, I feel connected. All over the world on this magical night, people wait . . . A hush falls

Dianne D. Price writes essays and fiction. She holds a Master's Degree in Social Work and a Bachelor's in Sociology and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She and her husband, Tony, live in Indian Rocks Beach, FL. She has three children and five grandchildren.

over village, town, city and suburb. Like the spaces between the hands in Michaelangelo's "Creation," God reaches out to touch us. In this precious empty time, the spaces come alive.

Throughout history, the Christmas season has always been a time of quiet expectation. As I think on these things, the centuries fall away . . . I am with the ancient ones at the dawn of time. I see them gathered on a hilltop. They await the sun's reappearance after the winter solstice. As it bursts above the horizon, they sigh. I feel their joy. Now spring will come and life will begin again.

Love knows no boundaries.

The years fly by . . . I am in a land far across the ocean. I see my ancestors. They stand in the town square gazing upward. They await the church bell's ring to call them to Midnight Mass. I feel their hope as they join hands to enter the Lord's sanctuary. I hear their voices singing hymns of praise and joy.

Then the scene changes . . . I am young and we are all gathered around the festive Christmas table. Faces of loved ones, no longer here, encircle me. Their eyes shine with the joy of Christmas. My grandfather prays: "May we all be together again this time next year." We bow our heads and give thanks.

As the years go by, I travel. Unexpectedly I find this sweet hushed holiness in far away places. It permeates the Holy land. It is on the Mount of Olives, the Dolorosa, the holy cave in Bethlehem . . . in all those places made sacred by the faith and hope of those who came before me.

The air hangs thick with the essence of this season. Hope is found in the Church of St. Rosalie in Sicily where the walls are lined with crutches and wheelchairs. One can smell it in

the mustiness, the air so sublime that I cover my head and withdraw in reverence.

I find this feeling again in a tiny stone chapel on the banks of the York River in Jamestown where colonists prayed. If one listens one can hear them still. Their voices hover in the air. Their spirit blesses me.

Some say they have found such sacredness in nature. And so have I, while gazing upon the spiraling Rockies or drinking in a flaming sunset. I feel it while walking down a tree-shaded lane with a friend. It descends at dusk on a Florida beach and under a star-lit, black velvet, Caribbean sky.

This feeling comes, unbidden, if one is open. It's worth attending to. For like a wordless meditation it has the power to renew. Perhaps it's another name for grace.

And as I contemplate these things, I am back in my living room again. It is Christmas Eve. I envision my grandchildren hundred of miles away. And I am with them. I see their eyes shine as they, like their parents before them, gaze on the lighted tree and behold once again the wonder of Christmas.

For on this night, we all touch. There is no space nor time between. Love knows no boundaries. As the world holds its breath . . . once again Love's spirit leaps and runs free. And I am filled with peace.

Christmas Prayers

While all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her swift course, thine Almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down out of thy royal throne, alleluia.

–Christmas Vespers, Western Rite

Loving Father, as we think of the little Child of Bethlehem make us glad that Thou the Almighty, the Creator, the infinite, Whose Being is utterly beyond even the power of our loftiest thought and most daring imagination, canst speak to us in a little human Child. Save us from being impressed too much by the impressive. Help us to see Thee in simple things: a child's love, birdsong, the quiet loveliness of dawn, human friendship and the peace of our homes. We bow in worship before the majesty of heaven revealed in a human life. Accept our worship and make our lives more like His. We ask it for His sake. Amen.

– Leslie D. Weatherhead

Almighty God, who has poured upon us the new light of thine Incarnate Word; grant that the same light enkindled in our hearts may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Christmas Mass at Dawn, Sarum Rite

Lover of My Soul

Beverly Corzine

Slowly Sunday fades into the western sea.
Among the shadows candles struggle to bless this place.
Bells chime.
    Feet shuffle.
        We nod to the sacred space.

I wait for thee, O Holy One, in this chapel dim.
Rising clouds of incense spiral upward,
Enveloping us in clouds of pungent sweetness.

I listen for you in the words of the hymn.
I sense your closeness as the chant begins.
I am here, O Great Lover of my Soul.

Draw me upward in swirling embrace
Into the fiery light of your care.
Love words of your ancient psalms possess my soul.

Love me! O Holy One.

Touch me!

Make me whole!

Beverly Corzine is on staff at St. Maria Goretti Roman Catholic Church in Arlington, TX and is a founding member of the Fort Worth Diocesan Commission on Christian Initiation.

For God All Things Are Possible

Diane Weber

Five years ago I began making phone calls for bids on a one-room building I planned for the open space in my backyard.

I had begun offering spiritual direction a number of years earlier. During my formal training I used an office in my church rectory. I later shared an office room with a friend in an old monastery building. The walls were so thin that I felt confidentiality was being breached. I used my living room for a time, but I had always wanted a hermitage of my own to use as a quiet place where I could enjoy the solitude of God. When I began mentioning this to friends and family, they said, "What's a hermitage?" My image was that of a small cottage, preferably in a forest on a lake, where a person could go to be alone with their thoughts and prayers. I thought

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having my own hermitage would provide a perfect holy place not just for private prayer, but to give spiritual direction. I dreamed of a prayerful space apart where there would be no chance of someone overhearing a conversation. I began to pray about my dream.

A few weeks later my sister and I discussed the cost and other aspects of possibly building a hermitage in my backyard. I really couldn't think of any way to come up with the necessary money. She said, "You're a chaplain, where's your faith?" I replied, "I believe God can create anything. I simply cannot identify the source of funds. If God wants me to have a hermitage, I need to be shown how to build it."

A short time after that, two of my friends and I met for a luncheon together. Months earlier, one of the women wanted to supplement retreat finances and pay for some things my retreat fees did not cover. When she first came forward with this suggestion I couldn't bring myself to accept the money. In the past I've always been on the "giving" end rather than the "receiving" end. Soon I realized that giving and sharing resources is necessary for ministry to happen. Because of my friend's generosity, we began a retreat fund to cover the fee of one person on each retreat who could not afford to go otherwise.

During our lunch that day I told my friends about the conversation with my sister and laughed at her comment about my "lack of faith." I really thought it was humorous that my sister, whom to my knowledge had never discussed anyone's faith before, had imagined that mine might produce $6,000 to build the shell of a hermitage. As my chuckling subsided, the woman who had started our retreat fund looked across our luncheon table and nodded her head and then held up

six fingers. I nearly choked! I said, "Oh, no . . . you can't mean what I'm thinking!"

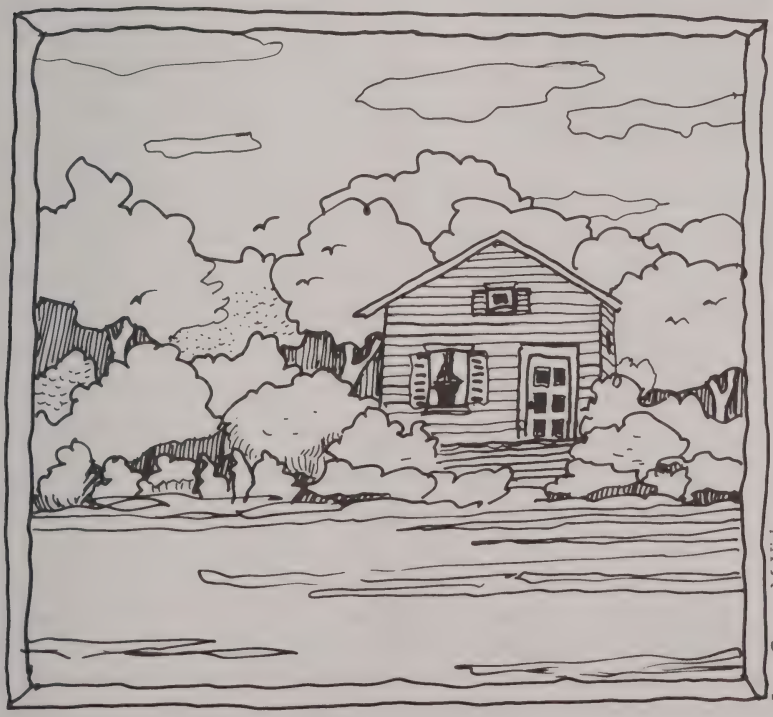
She shared her story with us over coffee and dessert. Years before she had not wanted to go to work, but the time had come to get a job. She prayed for the right opportunity and two good jobs were offered to her. In her prayer time, she perceived this advice, "Either job will be alright, but one is a little better than the other. You choose which one you want." So she chose one and decided to put aside a certain amount of money from each paycheck in thanksgiving and for whatever purpose God might communicate to her. Fourteen years went by as she continued to save money from each paycheck. The night before our luncheon, she looked in her dresser drawer and counted the money she had set aside in an envelope. She had prayed about her frustration, and told us: "I have saved this money for years and never got a feeling or sign about where it should go. My husband and I are going on a trip in two days and I don't want to leave it here in the drawer. If something happens to us, our children will find it and not realizing what I've saved it for, they just might spend it. I need to know what to do about this money!" When she heard me mention the initial amount needed to build a hermitage she knew her prayer had been answered. That evening she came to my home and gave me an envelope stuffed with $6,000 cash.

Following a spiritual path brings many great gifts to the human spirit.

The next morning while she was departing on her trip, I was on the phone inquiring about storage build-

ings which could have a few windows added. A builder soon constructed a storage frame. The shell became a 12 x 24 Cape Cod grey cottage with white shutters and a front deck. It took many more months to install insulation and drywall; a furnace and electricity; paint, blinds and furniture. Friends helped with various aspects of completing the hermitage. One helped with a red brick walkway while another sent her nephew over to drywall, paint and install a wonderful oak hardwood-like floor.

Each time I look toward my backyard I see an awesome miracle; a gift given by a loving God; a dream become concrete reality. God created something from



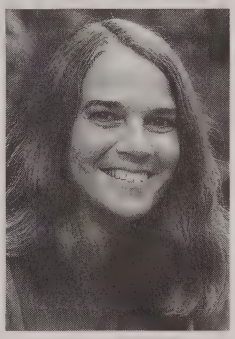
Lucy Graves McVicker

nothing in my life. When life becomes complicated and my faith weakens, I look from my dining room window into my backyard and meditate on the kind of God who is able and willing to create miracles from nothingness! It's the age old creation story retold and alive in my everyday reality. And that's not the end of it.

Following a spiritual path brings many great gifts to the human spirit. Among all spiritual gifts, the one I cherish most is a faith in things unseen and a belief that for God all things are possible!

Gratitude: The Heart of Grace

Elizabeth Ann Bartlett



A few years ago, I needed a new heart–literally. Little did I know how much receiving a new physical heart would also transform my spiritual heart. The spiritual gifts in the new life I received through my heart transplant have been many–gifts of joy, wonder, compassion, and perhaps more than all the others, gratitude.

Gratitude did not come easily in the years of illness and disability preceding my heart transplant. Stricken with heart failure at a young age (I was thirty-eight), I was angry and overwhelmed by a sense of deprivation of all that had been taken from me–my health, my work, traveling, walking in the woods, gardening, and most devastating, time with my husband and one-year-old son. I was filled with resentment, and that resentment was threatening to poison me. For my own physical, emotional, and spiritual survival, I

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had to come to see the blessings in this illness. And blessings were there to be found–a slower and saner pace of life, a time for reflection, a learned empathy for the old, the young, the infirm, and the oppressed. This was my first lesson in the transformative power of gratitude, for I found that when I looked for the blessings in this experience of illness, resentment melted away.

The transformative power of gratitude is the power to make of a curse, a blessing; to make of an absence, an abundance. I learned this when I focused on what I didn't have. I had a closet full of clothes and nothing to wear, a houseful of books and nothing to read, a life full of opportunity and nothing to do. When I focused on what I did have, the handful of fish and the few loaves of bread became enough to feed a multitude. Thankfulness–an appreciation of what we have fills our lives.

Grace.
Graci.
Gracias.
Thank you.

When we are grateful we are full–full of gratitude. The gratitude I'm talking about is that of the father for the prodigal son; the gratitude for that which was lost, that now is found; that amazing grace that fills us when something that we feared lost is returned to us. In our losing it, or nearly losing, it becomes all the more precious.

Living as I did with "sudden death syndrome," the possibility of losing my life was a daily presence. As the reality of the tenuousness of my life sank in, I came to see each day as a gift. I lived on the edge of lost and found; every day held the potential of my losing my life, and every day I found life again. This seemed particularly poignant to me each night as I tucked my little boy in his bed, wondering if I would live through the night. As I left his room, I would say, "See you in the morning," more in prayer than in certainty. And I

began each day with a "thank you" for living through the night and finding my sweet baby in my arms once more.

This sense of the fragility and preciousness of our time together pervaded our whole family. Thankfulness became a part of our family's daily ritual. Gathering around the table at dinner time, we would hold hands with one another and say grace and that grace always included a thank-you for one more day of being together.

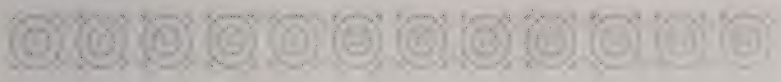
Grace. Graci. Gracias. Thank you. We say grace by giving thanks, and what is more, in giving thanks, we find grace. The interweaving of grace and gratitude are so apparent to me now. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, grace includes the divine influence to regenerate and sanctify and to impart strength to endure trial and resist temptation. I had been seeking a way to regenerate my spirit, to endure the trials of deprivation and resist the temptations of bitterness and resentment. I had turned to gratitude, and I had found grace. To live in a grace is to be living in a state of gratitude, gratitude for the ordinary things of life–the colors of the sunrise, clean water to drink, a warm hug, the first star of evening. A daily appreciation of the ever-present gifts of our lives, so easily taken for granted, grants us grace. Living in the fullness of such gratitude, we have little room for greed, resentment, or hostility. I know that even at my grumpiest, a remembrance of the gifts of my life will quickly restore in me the fullness and joy of gratitude. Of grace.

Sometimes I think the real gift I received in receiving the new heart is the gift of knowing gratitude in such a deep and profound way, for it was with my literal change of heart that I became vividly aware that what once had been lost now was found. Gratitude filled me and flowed from me, gratitude for the daily gifts I never again want to take for granted–to walk in the woods, to dance, to dive into a clear

cool lake, to work up a good sweat, to enter into a passionate discussion, to feel a lightness in my being, to tuck my son in bed at night knowing I'll be there when he wakes up in the morning.

I had the opportunity of nearly losing my life, and having it restored in me in deeper ways. Perhaps I had in a strange way stumbled across the meaning of Jesus' teaching that whomever would find life must first lose it. I had lost so much of my life, and now it was returned to me, and it seemed sevenfold. I was given a new heart, and that precious gift has given me a wonderful life and health, but it has also given me a new spirit–a spirit of gratitude–the heart of grace.

ILLUMINATIONS



The spiritual journey is an expanding awareness of the Divine as all in all, vividly and actually present in all external reality without dualistic separations. Here is the simple truth I keep trying to own, the one that breaks the bounds of beauty: everything is in God, and God is in everything. Think of it. There is no separation, no conflict, no obstruction between the world and the Divine. All that exists is penetrated with divinity. Creation, matter, our bodies–everything is a vast incarnation or manifestation of Real Presence.

– *Sue Monk Kidd*

A priest friend of mine cautioned me away from the standard God of our childhoods, who loves and guides you and then, if you are bad, roasts you: God as high-school principal in a gray suit who never remembers your name but is always leafing unhappily through your files.

– *Anne Lamott*

Don't turn your head. Keep looking
at the bandaged place. That's where
the light enters you.
And don't believe for a moment
that you're healing yourself.

– *Jelaluddin Rumi*

The first step on a spiritual path today is a return to a sense of one's own body.

– *Martha Heyneman*

Our body is precious. It is a vehicle for awakening. Treat it with care.

– *Buddha*

You would think, wouldn't you, that a faith founded on the premise of incarnation–of the Word-that-speaks-all-into-being made flesh to dwell among us–would hold in certain respect, perhaps in outright reverence, the body, the very form in which the divine had elected to be housed.

– *Nancy Mairs*

The fulness of joy is to behold God in everything.

– *Julian of Norwich*

Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have re-kindled this inner light.

– *Albert Schweitzer*

The highest art is the art of living an ordinary life in an extraordinary manner.

– *Tibetan Saying*

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED

Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal by Rachel Naomi Remen. Published by Riverhead Books, 1996.

The Wonder Worker by Susan Howach. Published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

This year two books kept me up at night. When each ended, I fingered the finished pages wishing there were more. *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, a wise book, is filled with stories by Rachel Naomi Remen, a New York-born philosophy undergrad who became, first, a medical doctor and then, a therapist who counsels people with life-threatening diseases. This book, now available in paperback, is an eloquent collection of parables about ordinary people who suffer real pain, ask unanswerable questions, and uncover inner resources and truths by living day-by-day with serious illness. These stories were first told to Rachel Remen behind closed doors. She in turn retells them respectfully while weaving in her own quest for healing and meaning.

She writes, "Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way wisdom gets passed along." She learned this from her grandfather, a rabbi, and has come to wonder: "Perhaps the world is one big healing community and we are all healers of each other. Perhaps we are all angels. And we do not know."

I found myself reading Remen's book as I might scripture, reciting phrases aloud that I might remember these truths that will help me live.

The Wonder Worker by Susan Howatch is fiction that reads like the uncovered journals of four faithful yet flawed souls. Nicholas Darrow, an Anglican priest, runs a healing center in the heart of London. His magnetic charisma and extraordinary gifts of perception draw in those in pain. To Alice, for example, a lonely and fearful woman, Nicholas appears to be a near kin of God. But to Rosalind, Nick's successful wife, he is a source of fear. Lewis Hall, another priest with sinister looking eyes that nonetheless, see with precision, unravels the complex truth about Nicholas, and nearly everyone else, yet remains blind to himself. *The Wonder Worker*, in keeping with the six previous novels in Howatch's bestselling sequence, whose heroes are spiritual directors and lusty clergy, explores the themes of redemption and self-knowledge in characters equally capable of extraordinary faith and deep self-deception. The longing for God and the wayward impulse that marks Howatch's characters makes them utterly dear, for they readily remind us of the people we know and the people we are.

Keep A Firm Grip

Gabrielle Perez

Keep a firm grip on your dreams,
your hopes,
your spirit.
Keep a firm grip on your beliefs
and
trust your heart.
Be alone
if you have to.
Sometimes it's the best thing for you.
Keep a firm grip on your life and
don't ever let go.
Be strong and hold steady on
the things that matter to you.
Have courage and move forward.
Don't ever let go.
Keep a firm grip on the helping
hand as it helps you up and never lets you
down.
So stand tall and walk on.

Gabrielle D. Perez is twelve-years-old. She likes to sing, read, write stories and do karate. (She is a red belt on her way to black.) She wants to be a famous writer and singer when she grows up. She lives with her parents and sister, Raquel, in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. They are members of the Jewish faith.

Incarnation

D. S. Dod

Cinnamon buns rising in the window
next to the bougainvillaea
Valencia orange marmalade
ripe banana bread fragrant and rich
all will go in the basket for don Jorge
widowed, waning and lonely
bed-ridden and bearded.
My sisters and I trudge the smooth clay path
through coffee and lilies
taking turns carrying the gifts for
the ancient child we find sitting in soiled
swaddling cloths on a sagging bed.
"Mama sends you these things."
Love made bread
ourselves becoming present
words bearing life
the Spirit is human
and flesh divine.

David Stockton Dod is an Episcopal priest, the son of missionaries to Puerto Rico, who is Chaplain at Atascadero State Hospital, Atascadero, CA.

Lucy Graves McVicker

A Treasury of Personal Prayer From The World's Spiritual Traditions
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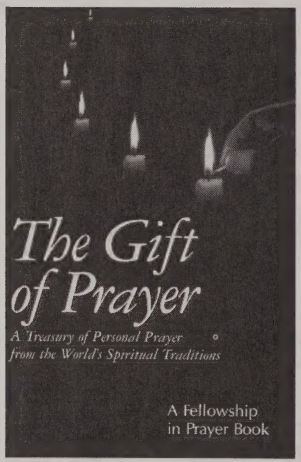

The prayers in this book were selected for their simplicity, beauty, and power of expression, and above all for their value as prayers for our daily use—prayers that might reflect and express our hope, our suffering, our joy, our gratitude. They come from great writers and great sources, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, Christian and non-Christian—from English, Irish, Jewish, and African to Asian, Hindu, and Native American.

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-Thomas Moore

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-Karen Sanders, Chaplain
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Vol. 49, No. 6

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ISSN 1096-5939

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291 Witherspoon Street
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